

## CASE STUDY: Tamil Refugee Project: Skills for the Disadvantaged



The Tamil Refugee Training & Education Centre (TR TEC) is part of a network of three Tamil organisations in London that offer services to Tamil refugees:

- Tamil Refugee Action Group: provides immigration and welfare advice;
- Tamil Community Housing Association: provides housing and housing benefit advice; and
- TR TEC: looks after training and employment of Tamil refugees.

TR TEC has branches in three areas of London where the Tamil population is concentrated: East London (Ilford), South London (Tooting) and West London (Alperton).

TR TEC's project Skills for the Disadvantaged, provides ICT training, ESOL, information, advice and guidance on employment and progress into further education.

The project started on 1<sup>st</sup> January 2005 and runs until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006 with funding from the LSC Pan London ESF co-financing programme. TR TEC will apply for more funding once present funding has ceased.

The project targets unemployed Tamil refugees in the London area; it accepts people with or without qualifications.

So far over 3000 beneficiaries have gone through TR TEC's courses with many of them ending up in further education or permanent employment. The Project Manager at TR TEC emphasises that they have had no problem with movement into employment from social security benefits.

### **Success Criteria of TR TEC's project**

#### **1. Increase participants' skills to compete in the labour market**

TR TEC identified that Tamil refugees' access to the labour market can be hindered by language barriers, cultural barriers, and insufficient IT skills. Its courses address these issues as follows:

<i>Barriers</i>	<i>What TR TEC does to remedy</i>
Language	The course is popular because it is taught in both English and Tamil. This is particularly appealing to newcomers whose level of English is low or intermediate. Being taught in Tamil by Tamil staff offers them the opportunity to learn English gradually and in familiar environment.
Cultural barriers & enhancing their communication skills:	TR TEC appreciates the fact that the UK's labour market is increasingly competitive – they cite the effect of Polish workers' arrival in the UK. TR TEC believes that Sri Lankan newcomers need more help to adapt than migrants from within the EU. Thus, the project offers the opportunity to train participants in the cultural aspects of the UK's labour market. The staff use their experience to teach them how to achieve success, get around shyness (thought by TR TEC to be a significant feature amongst newcomers) and to understand English society and hence integrate better and increase their overall confidence so that they can work with other communities.
Modern Technology (IT Skills)	TR TEC assumes that in today's labour market it is required that employees have at least a minimum level of ICT skills. Some participants are villagers who, because of the civil war and underdevelopment in their country of origin, didn't have access to modern technology.

#### **2. Target the disadvantaged from the Tamil refugee community**

TR TEC targets women and focuses a great deal of effort on increasing women's representation in their projects. Currently women make up 50-60% of course participants in contrast to 20-30% a few years ago. They have found an innovative solution on how to increase women's participation. TR TEC recognised that the problem with women's participation has cultural elements –

women stay at home because they are married and/or are pregnant. The organisation uses a mobile project which has eighteen laptops with wireless connection, which they take around Tamil community centres and temples to encourage women to participate. They leave the laptops at a community centre or temple for three days to get women interested in computers and subsequently the organisation's project. TR TEC also pays for child care in order to support women's participation.

### **3. Guidance**

TR TEC provides comprehensive job search skills, through access to computers and the internet, guidance on websites that advertise job vacancies, CV and covering letter writing and coaching in interview techniques, including involving potential employers in mock interviews.

### **4. Link to employers and work experience**

TR TEC has, in the last 15 years, established links with local employers – mostly Tamil businesses. TR TEC uses what it calls Tamil Yellow Pages to contact Tamil businesses, to convince them to take participants on work experience. These businesses - because they are Tamil and are aware that TR TEC is a charity - are always willing to help Tamil and do their bit by giving Tamil an advantage in the labour market through providing work experience.

TR TEC actively suggests work placements to participants and trains them in how to best use their time during placements and how to win over potential employers. TR TEC points out that it is more difficult to place participants with non-Tamil employers. As the project manager says, "It is difficult to persuade other employers to accept refugees as trainees. It could be due to their accent, but we are still trying hard".

### **Example of Employer's experience with TR TEC's project**

RT is Director of a small travel and estate agency that has been offering work placements for TR TEC's trainees on a regular basis for many years. He has generally been impressed with TR TEC's trainees because they come to him with good level of computer skills and with good communication skills, are always punctual and have good customer relations. His feedback has improved the quality of TR TEC's recent trainees. Previously trainees lacked experience in modern office equipment. He says: "I know that trainees were sent to me to gain experience in how to work in an office environment, to know how to answer the phone, how to file, how to use the fax, photocopier and so on. So before, my staff and I used to spend time in showing these trainees from TR TEC how to operate this equipment. But when I raised the issue with TR TEC, they have incorporated my concerns in their training courses. They start to train their course participants how to use office equipment. Now, trainees come to me as though they have already worked in office before. This helps a lot because we don't spend much

time in showing them how to answer the phone, or use the fax. It saves us time. Now when we ask them to file this document or photocopy this and that they will do it perfectly. So our time with them focuses on how to use our specific computer database, how to work in an estate and travel agency. So when we are very busy, we trust that they will look after customers and do the bookings and so on”

Overall, he says, TR TEC teaches trainees theoretical skills and his business offers those on work placements practical skills. For example, in customer relations they train people on how to deal with customers and be friendly. They also build up their confidence by training them in the skills needed to work in a travel and estate agent, in accountancy and banking skills, and in how to operate computer database specific to the business.

He says that he has taken two TR TEC’s trainees on permanently because he was very satisfied with their skills and discipline. He also recommends TR TEC to his business associates and some have been taken on by a Post Office, and a mortgage broker. He says that because he is happy with the trainees that TR TEC sends him, he spreads the word about them and their trainees whenever the opportunity arises in business meetings, and to his business friends.

He gives the insight that newcomers nowadays are luckier than his generation, who came to the UK in the 1970s/80s when discrimination was much worse. There were no training courses like TR TEC’s, to help overcome barriers to labour market entry. TR TEC also pays for participants’ transport. TR TEC’s guidance – how to get jobs – and other vital services were not available to him and those of his generation. In addition there are now many Sri Lankan businesses which, like his, are ready to help their country men and women with practical placements.

Mr G, who is in charge of the IT courses at TR TEC, and who has previously worked in software development has developed a programme which enables the TR TEC to keep in touch with its trainees after they leave the course.

### **What’s Next for TR TEC?**

In order to improve and tailor courses according to current needs, TR TEC actively keeps in touch with changes in the labour market through reading reports/studies conducted by LSC, LDA, and the Government Office of London, and also participates in research such as the 3DsLondon Project. TR TEC aims to expand its services to participants from other communities. The course coordinator, says, “We need more funding to help our community even more. But with more funding, we could also expand the skills we gained over the years and use our high success rate in helping trainees into the labour market to offer similar services to other communities.”

### **Project Beneficiaries**

**1. Mrs A**

Mrs A found out about the course in the Tooting branch from a Tamil radio programme. She was so pleased to be on the course that she was happy to take two buses every day to get to the branch. Mrs. A participated in a six-months advanced IT diploma course, which also included English and accountancy. She liked the fact the course was taught in both languages (Tamil and English). After she successfully completed the course, TR TEC found her a placement with a Tamil-run accountancy firm. She was taken on on a permanent basis and is also pursuing further studies. She says, "Even though I finished my course at TR TEC, I keep in touch because I gained so much from this course and I want this course to continue for our people. So I want to come here and help any time I can. I spread word about the course, especially to women, because there is, you know, inequality between women and men everywhere. So I want to help address this, and I know the course will help in addressing this."

**2. Mrs S**

Mrs S found out about the course in the Tooting branch from a leaflet in the temple. She decided to do the IT and English course, because she knew that to get a job in this country, one had to have computing and language skills. She found the course a great help because "I was sad at home and I wasn't able to even open and log into a computer... It also helped me a lot that the course was in Tamil and English, because if it were only in English, it would have been difficult". She is currently working for Tamil Media. "I was sent by TR TEC to do two weeks work experience at Tamil Media. And they took me on a permanent, part-time basis after I finished my training". She appreciated the fact that TR TEC staff were very helpful in finding jobs. "TR TEC called jobs agencies [during the training] to come to the Centre and help us fill application forms. We also gave these agencies our CVs, which they sent around to employers."

Both Mrs A and Mrs S say that TR TEC has let them use the facilities at Tooting even after they finished their courses. The Project Manager adds, "Tooting Centre is very small, it could be better. Internet is dial-up and we want broadband. We want bigger facilities to use to apply for other jobs."

You can contact the Tamil Refugee and Training Centre at:

Tamil Refugee and Training Centre  
5<sup>th</sup> Floor, Commercial House  
406 - 410 Eastern Avenue  
Ilford, Essex  
IG2 6NQ

Tel: 020 8554 2963

Email: [sri@trtec.org](mailto:sri@trtec.org)